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Gilchrest considers removing mute swans' protection

Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest said Tuesday that he is considering introducing legislation that would exempt mute swans from federal protection, allowing Maryland and other states to resume killing them.

At a meeting of the House Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans subcommittee Tuesday in Annapolis, the Kent County Republican said he believes the nonnative birds have done "minimal" damage to the environment, but could pose much more of a threat if their numbers aren't kept under control, The (Annapolis) Capital reported.

"Exotic and invasive species are having a huge impact," he said.

Gilchrest, whose district includes the Eastern Shore and part of Anne Arundel County, said he could reach a decision in a "few months."

Maryland's mute swan population has grown to more than 4,000 since five mute swans escaped from a Talbot County estate in the 1950s. The birds eat up to 8 pounds of bay grasses daily, consuming more than 10 million pounds a year, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

Bay grasses, which provide habitat to fish and shellfish, are considered vital to the health of the Chesapeake Bay. Since the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in 2001 that mute swans are covered under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, Maryland and other states obtained federal permits to kill mute swans or shake or grease their eggs to keep them from hatching.

An animal rights group sued Maryland, and a federal judge ruled in September that the state did not prove it would suffer "substantial harm" if the birds weren't killed. That opinion led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to stop issuing the permits.

Under the terms of Maryland's mute swan management plan, the state hopes to reduce the population to 500 birds, said Larry Hindman, a waterfowl project manager with the DNR. The department killed about 100 swans before the May 22 court challenge.

"We're concerned that there is a lack of strong data linking mute swans to the limiting of (bay grasses') growth," said Elizabeth Stallman, a scientist with the Human Society of the United States.

But not all animal-rights group oppose killing mute swans. "It is painful for the National

Audubon Society to support population control of any bird," said David Pardoe, a member of the society's board of directors. "The health of the Chesapeake Bay is dependent upon the health of aquatic grasses. The mute swan is one more factor why the bay is struggling for its own ecological existence."